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No Justice, No Peace - And No Conventions

The Rev. John Thomas and Imam Mahdi Bray

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Christians and Muslims agree that God is a god of justice, who stands with the poor and the downtrodden. That is why the prophetic history of our faith demands that our behavior - even the millions of dollars we spend on meetings and conventions - is measured according to the standard of justice.

It is not enough for us simply to have a meeting in a beautiful building, if the people who clean that building are refused respect. It is not enough for us to enjoy delicious meals if the cooks and waiters and dishwashers work without dignity. It is not enough for us to relax in rooms with comfortable beds and sparkling bathrooms if the women cleaning the rooms are groaning. Because our faith demands justice, we cannot ignore the plight of the workers at the facilities where we hold our meetings.

This commitment, however, is sometimes difficult to put into practice. What standards shall we use to determine whether an injustice is being committed? To whom shall we listen? When we have heard the two sides to every story, on which side shall we find ourselves?

Amid all the shades of gray, there is one clear line we can rely on: We shall not support lawbreakers. The city of Hartford has an ordinance requiring labor peace for developments with special tax breaks. When millions of dollars of state money were spent to build Adriaen's Landing, the legislative leaders made it clear that this labor peace ordinance applied. The Hartford Marriott received city tax breaks worth \$30 million. When the taxpayers of Hartford provided this gift, they expected labor peace in return.

The Waterford Group, however, refuses to acknowledge this law. It contends that the law does not apply, even though the attorney general has made it clear that it does. So long as Waterford refuses labor peace, there will be no peace. Instead there are picket lines, boycotts and rallies.

Staying in the Hartford Marriott and using the Adriaen's Landing Convention Center during these times is not a neutral act. It gives financial and moral support to the Waterford Group, and takes a stand against the workers' struggle. We cannot in good faith shepherd our flocks into such an environment.

The ordinance requires that a peaceful solution is reached or the hotel's tax break ends. But it does not specify the details of the solution. We believe there are people of integrity on both sides of this dispute. We are confident that if both sides were willing to

talk, a compromise could be achieved. The people of Hartford and of Connecticut deserve a solution. Now.

The people of Hartford elected Mayor Eddie Perez to uphold and enforce the law. In this case, upholding the law means persuading both sides to settle this dispute so that the city is spared a never-ending labor war that benefits no one.

We want to be able to bring our conferences and conventions to Hartford. But we do not want to put our members and guests in the difficult position of having to choose whether to cross a picket line or violate a boycott.

The United Church of Christ is planning on bringing 10,000 members to our 50th anniversary general synod in June 2007, but because of our concern about the possibility of labor unrest and injustice for the workers, we are exploring other sites. More than 10,000 Muslims are planning to convene in these facilities for the next few summers, and our community is wrestling with the same question.

The only way out of this dilemma - indeed, the only way to ensure that business thrives in downtown Hartford's gleaming new facilities - is for Mayor Perez to enforce the labor peace ordinance.

We want to support Hartford. So we urge the Waterford Group, the union and the mayor come together and achieve a reasonable compromise that can ensure the success of the Convention Center and hotel. The dispute needs to end. Peace and justice must prevail.

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